

Last week, I visited the law enforcement headquarters of one of our communities in the Eighth Congressional District, and I was appalled at what they showed me there.

On a table were packets and containers with brightly-colored labels bearing names like "Go-Go" and "Kush Blueberry," the latter with an image of smoke wafting in the background. I was told these were some of the most addictive drugs currently in widespread use in Southern Missouri, and that they were available in many places over the counter of a retail store. As a result, they are used by adults and young people alike, some as young as junior-high age.

To me, they looked like packages for candy.

These synthetic drugs are made up of chemicals that have no medical use, but are created for no other purpose than for abuse. They are "marketed" as bath salts and incense to skirt laws, but they can be easily modified into a stimulant not unlike methamphetamine or cocaine. These bath salts and incense are addictive like meth, they come from India and China, and abuse of these drugs is on a dramatic rise.

Both the agents I talked to and media reports of the horrific effects of these synthetic drugs bear witness to the fact that bath salts are extremely harmful, incredibly dangerous, and shamefully easy to get.

Many states, including Missouri, have acted to outlaw synthetic drugs, creating misdemeanor and felony offenses for possession of bath salts. But many states have not yet acted, including some of Missouri's neighbors, so the matter of crossing the state line to secure these drugs is relatively easy. At the federal level, I have worked on legislation to encourage the Drug Enforcement Agency to permanently criminalize bath salts and other synthetic drugs as Class I stimulants.

More must be done. We have to better train law enforcement officers all over the country to detect these drugs, we have to get them out of the U.S. Mail as a distribution device, and we have to fight the trafficking and use of harmful substances that look like candy and kill like crack cocaine.

These drugs are most frightening to us as parents and grandparents. While we try to instill in our children the intelligence to know that any drug is incredibly dangerous, these drugs are more powerful, more addictive, instantly harmful and easily obtained. The fact of the matter is that there is no way for any of us to know what chemicals may be in those brightly-wrapped packages.

Fortunately, federal resources can be brought to bear on the problem. The same agencies dedicated to keeping meth and marijuana and MDMA out of our communities can use the training, the laboratories, the contacts and the resources at their disposal to fight the scourge of bath salts. We have to support their endeavor, because the health of our children depends on giving them a chance to escape their first, possibly fatal, encounter with this and any other drug.